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AUTHOR Zophy, Angela Howard
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ABSTRACT

The "Handbook of American Women's History" (Garland, 1990) was compiled to cope with the lack of basic information about women's history. The successful launching of the handbook was the result of networking among Women's Studies colleagues. Colleagues and students joined in the project, not to gain fame and fortune, but to do a "good deed" for the academic community. This cooperation was indicative of a new climate: those in Women's Studies brought the processes of the women's movement, as well as the principles, to help identify and address the lack of presence of women and minorities in academe and in the disciplines. A point to be emphasized is that there now exists adequate support for such projects as the handbook, which has been well received and has brought profits to Garland Publishing and national recognition to both the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and the University of Houston-Clear Lake. The success of the handbook is important because it has paved the way for other much-needed works that will increase the presence of women and minorities in academe, and is positive proof that such ideas can become viable projects which, in turn, result in significant contributions to women's studies and other fields. Perhaps the handbook is proof that no good deed goes unpunished or unpublished. Hopefully there will be more such works that result from the determination and dedication of women and men who are undeterred by the possible punishment that accompanies the task of the editor. Such "good deeds" must not go "unpublished." (PRA)

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Angela Howard Zophy

Associate Professor of History, Box 400 [Offc: 713-283-3369]

University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston TX 77058-1098

Editor, Handbook of American Women's History (Garland, 1990)

MELUS Luncheon Speech

CEA/CCTE CONFERENCE

"EDITING THE HANDBOOK OF AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY: NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUBLISHED"

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Associate Professor of History, Box 400 [Offc: 713-283-3369]
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Friday, April 19, 1991
Noon, Bluebonnet Room
Sheraton Gunter Hotel
205 East Houston Street
San Antonio TX 78205
(512) 227 - 3241

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I want to thank my colleague Edith Blicksilver for extending the invitation to address you this afternoon. Professor BLicksilver is an example of all of the wonderful, dedicated people whose entries were the heart and soul of the Handbook, a project which took five years to complete. Frankly, by the end of the fourth year, I feared that none of our contributors would EVER willingly speak to me again! Since few of you know enough about me to understand my slightly bent sense of humor, I think I had better explain the title of my presentation right up-front.

The title is, in fact, a sort of "freudian" typographical error: You probably recognize it as an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's witticism "no good deed goes unpunished," which ought to caution do-gooders everywhere.

My experience as the editor of the Handbook often brought this particular quote to my mind, for the best of intentions are no protection against doing "not-so-good." Nevertheless, having now seen the Handbook in print and, in fact, into its third printing, I can tell you, from a personal experience that has been both political and professional, that this particular "good deed," at least, went neither unpunished nor unpublished.

The inspiration for the Handbook of American Women's History was an intention to do a good deed, to create a useful tool for my colleagues and students, as well as for myself. As each of you have probably done, perhaps on a smaller scale, I undertook the editing of the Handbook because I felt that such a reference work was needed. I perceived it to be my feminist duty.

Back in the early 1980s, I had been asked to speak at an International Women's Day celebration. As is standard operation procedure for academics, I began to research the origins of IWD. I was challenged to find any specific information about this date; I had to dig out oblique references in secondary sources about altogether different topics. I realized that there existed no collection of basic information about women's history, that there was not one general reference work that could at least steer me in the right direction.

When I addressed this concern to my colleagues in Women's

Studies, they admitted to having similar difficulties in their own fields. I decided what was needed was a handbook of general information on women's history: "Someone," I naively asserted, "should publish a handbook for women's history!"

The successful launching of the Handbook was the result of networking among Women's Studies colleagues. The Women's Studies Program of the University of Wisconsin - Parkside provided the support necessary to launch the project by providing a forum in which I could express the need for such a reference work. The UW System's Librarian for Women's Studies passed the suggestion along to a friend of hers who was an editor at Garland Publishing. My friend and colleague Frances M. Kavenik not only challenged me to accept the request for a proposal for the project, but taught me enough "remedial" Word-Perfect to facilitate my job as editor, which included that of letter-writing recruiter - or, if you prefer, shanghai-er; consummate whiner, by phone or mail; and emotional-blackmailer, at great distances, for not even in England or Europe were likely contributors beyond my grasp. [What can I say? We editors have to be resourceful and sometimes wily.]

Because my colleagues and students shared my concerns, they joined in the project, not because I offered them fame and fortune, but because I appealed to their dedication to Women's History and Women's Studies. For none of us was there any anticipation of gratitude or glory, of praise or prizes, of a reward other than publishing a "good deed," that would be of service to our academic community."

The history of our Handbook exemplifies the results of the special commitment of those of us who work in the fields of women's and minority history and in Women's studies. Therefore it should come as no surprise that, in the course of getting the final manuscript to the printer, I came to "owe" just about everyone I knew, and many folks I had never met. I especially cherish those "strangers," as well as those familiar friends and students, who answered my "eleventh hour" calls for assistance.

Their cooperation was indicative of a new climate of that made the Handbook possible. I think that this cooperation is characteristic of how we in Women's Studies have brought the processes of the women's movement, as well as the principles, to help us not only identify, but to address the lack of presence of women and minorities in academe and in all the disciplines.

I took volunteers from everywhere: faculty in all the disciplines, students, biggies in the various fields, our colleagues in libraries nationwide, and community contacts. And it is important for a would-be editor to start out with lots of friends, not only so that you can impose upon them, but so that you can impose upon their friends too. When all is said and done, Networking is just another term for an extended community of purpose. All of the contributors to the Handbook shared a commitment to furthering Women's History and Women's Studies.

The potential and timeliness of a work like the Handbook garnered support from a publisher and two universities, as well as from a host of scholars, librarians, teachers and students. Even though when I began this project I was part-time faculty,

the History department and the Social Science Division supported me in both large and small ways, because my colleagues and the University of Wisconsin - Parkside supported Women's History and Women's Studies. When I left UW-Parkside, and came to the University of Houston-Clear Lake, I found more support for the Handbook among my new colleagues and administrators, but especially from the Women's Studies faculty at UHCL.

The point to be emphasized here is that there now exists adequate support for such projects as the Handbook, which has been well received and has brought profits to Garland Publishing and national recognition to both the University of Wisconsin - Parkside and the University of Houston - Clear Lake. Armed with a proposal that speaks to the need for more publications by, for and about women as well as minorities, a moderately pushy person can amass the necessary collegial, institutional, and publishing cooperation and support to take a good idea from the proposal stage to publication.

We all know that it is required to ignore the contribution of all editors: the quintessential "thankless task," if editing is done well, it becomes an invisible contribution to the text. Editors exist to nag contributors, to offer constructive criticism and suggest improvements, to keep the "big picture" in mind as the parts of the text come together, and to take the heat for everything that goes awry. It is not at all like being god, it is more like being a concerned parent. Because no one is supposed to notice a successful editor, I probably should not mention either Marie Ellen Larcada or Kennie Lyman at Garland,

both of whom served as my consultants and sometimes safety-net.

But I cannot resist gloating about securing Fran Kavenik as my Associate editor. A well-published scholar in her own right, Fran brought so many crucial skills to the completion of the Handbook. To see her name on our cover brings me great satisfaction, since her support had helped initiate the project, and her talents were critical to producing a final manuscript that met the highest standards, [those high standards were also Fran's contribution].

The success of the Handbook is important because it paves the way for other much-needed works that will increase the presence of women and minorities. Actually, its example has already created similar opportunities.

At my suggestion, Garland will be publishing a series of Directories of Minority women. As the series editor, I have had little difficulty finding scholars in this field who agreed that this was an idea whose time had come. There will be a volume on African-american Women, Asian-American women, Immigrant American Women, Latina-American Women, and Native American Women, as well as a volume to cover Immigrants from non-European countries.

Each of the editors will be fanning out to recruit contributors and suggestions for entries. If you have a suggestion or would like to become one of their contributors, please use the addresses on the list of editors. I have another name for the list: Professor Deena Gonzalez of history department of Pomona College, in Claremont CA [ZIP 91711-6337], recently has agreed to become the editor of the volume on Latina American

Women. I am still searching for an editor for the non-European immigrant women's volume.

I am certain that there are among you, who are listening to me here today, ideas for publications that will, likewise, fill voids or add to what we know about women and minorities in our disciplines. The Handbook is proof positive that such ideas can become viable projects which, in turn, result in significant contributions to our fields.

Perhaps this experience which I have shared with you will encourage someone here to stake out an un-mined area within Women's Studies that will produce new and needed works of scholarship and collections of reference material by, for, and about women from all ethnic groups and historical contexts. There is, after all, no substitute for inspired and undaunted determination [and a little dumb luck], in any effort to make a contribution to an important field like Women's History or Women's Studies.

Maybe the Handbook is proof that no good deed goes unpunished or unpublished. I certainly hope that there are and will be more such works that result from the determination and dedication of women and men who are committed to Women's History and Women's Studies and who are undeterred by the possible punishment that accompanies the task of editing or writing works which will add to the scholarship of Women's Studies: undeterred by the possible "punishment" that accompanies the task of the editor, such "good deeds" must not go "unpublished."